

An Offer She Might Refuse

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Summary: As the urge to go to the western woods comes sudden, Hikari doesn't know her "Day of Flight" to be near. Others do & try to persuade her to stay ...

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><p>When Gian-Carlo told her his father wanted to speak with her, Hikari thought only the baker would be waiting in the back room where the accounts were done. She was surprised on seeing his wife, Klara, seated to the right of the old desk. The older woman smiled back as Ben pointed to her seat at the front.</p>

Hikari sat in slight apprehension adjusting her apron. She knew Ben (The sizable man was sometimes referred to as "Little Ben" by some townspeople.) to be a stern but kindly employer in her three plus years at the bakery. As she was an excellent worker he never before needed to speak much in regard to her performance. With Klara also present, she knew it was something important.

In his characteristic taking of the initiative, Ben started things off.

"So how long HAS it been since you started working for us Hikari? Three years isn't it?"

"Almost 3 1/2 sir," she replied.

"And in all this time, I've had no reason to regret having you on here."

Hikari relaxed slightly but the relief was very short lived.

"Until now . . ."

The young haibane brought herself up abruptly. If it had something to do with-

"It has nothing at all to do with your performance here," Ben assured her. "In fact I'd like to have you here always. It's . . ."

Hikari blinked, her bespectacled eyes shifting between the baker & his wife.

"We would've talked to you sooner but it wasn't the right time. We worried how you might take it & . . . we don't want the Washi having any lee-way in this-"

"Ben!" Klara tightened her grip on Bens' hand.

"It's all right Klara . . . he's never done anything in regard to us before . . . & it's doubtful he'll do anything now." He looked back to Hikari. "Klara has something of a reverence for the Washi that I uh . . . lack. But that's another subject entirely."

Confused, the haibane girl started asking, "but what does the Washi-?"

"I'll get right to the point. It's about your . . . Day of Flight."

The young girls' eyes widened as the three words hit her hard. Day of Flight!? Something she & others of her kind spoke seldom & in hushed whispers. Except for the emotional times when Kuu & Reki "left" or when mentioned by the Washi himself, it was something all Haibane kept among themselves. As long as she lived in Guri, she had not heard of humans having any knowlege of the deeper things of the Haibane. From what she heard in passing, she assumed they just accepted the fact a Haibane, every so often, "leaves" & nothing more.

Yet here were two before her who in only a few moments, revealed they may have knowlege not typical. It just wasn't possible. Unless they were more than they appeared to be . . .

"How . . . how could you . . .?"

"Know anything at all about this?"

Hikaris' mind raced.

"How . . . when it's a Haibanes' time to leave? When whatever inner problem or . . . uh . . . sin is resolved, a Haibane goes to those ruins in the woods & leaves in a display of light over the wall?"

Speechless, Hikari could only stare.

"The reason for my knowing this," the baker not hesitant, "& more, is simple. I ... some twenty five years ago ... Was one of you. A Haibane."

The young ladys' mouth fell open. It couldn't be ... yet ...

"It's not possible! A Haibane who doesn't take his day of flight ... leave the nest ... is ... is ... doomed to ..."

"Hiding away? ... Living away from one & all in a miserable isolated existence. I know. Yet ... as you can see ... I'm not only among the living so to speak but doing well."

"But how can you-?"

"All in good time hon. We have more important things to discuss ..."

"And you ...?", Hikari turned to Klara, "are you ... ?"

"Oh heavens no dear!" Klara smiled. "No ... I was born like everyone else in Guri. I met Ben soon after he started work here."

"So you ... he ...?"

"We've been married just over twenty five years ago." Both hands now gripping Bens' left. "Four sons & many memories. I've not regretted it."

"Nor I," Ben declared. "As they say 'behind every successfull man & father is a woman.' Klara is that & much more."

Amazed puzzlement showed acutely on Hikaris' face. So much yet in a way so little had been dropped in her lap. "I'm ... more than ... confused. I don't ... can't see ... how ... you could ..."

"Ben? I don't think we're going to get any further with Hikari without telling your story first."

"I suppose you're right hon. It might clarify the urgency of the situation.

"Try not to ask questions until after I'm finished Hikari. What I'm about to tell you must not leave this room. If, however, you feel you MUST speak to the Washi about this there's nothing I can do to stop you. You are, after all, still under the rule of the Renmei. It'd be interesting to hear what the uh ... old man ... has to say."

Hikari noted the bakers' look of disdain on his face on that mention of the Communicator. Was it possible Ben & the Washi had bad feelings between? Even enmity?

"Well, best to begin at the beginning as all stories go ...

"I was born ... hatched ... at Abandoned Factory some thirty years ago. Like you, I was presented with halo & went through the ordeal of wings ... the already blackening feathers marked me ..."

Hikaris' intake of breath was more than audible.

"Yes ... Unlike you, I was born ... sin bound.

"While still somewhat disoriented, I was taken to the temple, presented to the Washi & went through the initiation of bell ritual & ... paybook."

"Paybook" sounded like an expectoration. The young Haibane wasn't sure she was going to like the way Bens' narrative seemed to be going.

"The crowning gesture of the ritual was the Washi taking me aside & revealing the meaning of my black feathers. Seems I was guilty of some transgression or ten in my past life & I had to own up to it somehow ... atone for something I couldn't even vaguely remember. My only clue is my cocoon dream ... One of fire, battle & intrigue.

"I found such a thing unacceptable. I saw no reason to feel responsible for something I knew next to nothing about & didn't even try. Try as I might, I couldn't get what I felt was a straight answer from the Washi over the time of my being a Haibane. Needless to say, he & I didn't get along well."

Hikari knew the Washi to be a stern judge & guide. In her time at the bakery she found Ben to be a strong (Though kindly & fair.) personality. She could only imagine, but it seemed logical for there to be a clash between the two.

"Because of my black feathers, later wings, a good many of my "fellow" haibane looked a bit askance of me at first. In time most of them knew I had a "problem" of some kind & accepted me as one of them.

"As time went on, I drifted from Abandoned Factory, taking up residence in the farming district as a hired hand. I took to wearing a jacket or heavy shirt & a hat to hide wings & halo. Though I was rather proud of my black wings, I still didn't care for the attention they got from those around me. You know what that's like, I'm sure . . ."

"Yes ... Even though they're usually nice & just curious, it's still a pain."

"Seems after a time, everyone there assumed I was a regular human. Something I didn't try to correct. Only the couple at the large farm I worked at had any idea. I'll always be grateful for their keeping quiet about it.

"It was there I became fascinated with the process of growing things & making them into finished product. In my deliveries of produce & grain to town, I became acquainted with the various shopkeepers & business folk. Contacts I maintain to this day . . ."

"But you . . . your Day of Flight ..." Though she inwardly cringed at the thought of the baker snapping at her (He never did.) her impatience got the better of her. The man only smiled & went on.

"Yes . . . yes . . . that. I had been warned repeatedly by the Washi of the consequences of my . . . uh . . . rebelliousness... but . . . that . . . & . . . the old mans' deliberate inexactness & just being less than

vague, only made me want to dig my heels in deeper.

"Once ... Not long before I was due to ... uh ... 'leave'" The pause was long. "I marched into the temple ... Without bothering for permission to enter or even speak ... & DEMANDED he be plain & just out & out tell me what it was in my past I had to be so contrite about. Several of those speechless goons had to escort me out. I then concluded he really knew no more about it than I did ... Probably less."

Hikaris' mouth hung open in amazement. She had no idea a Haibane could be so defiant. From what Nemu told her of Reki, this was beyond comprehension. Yet ... there it was.

"The old man had me restricted to the farming district for an indefinite period. Being I had no intention of reform I stayed there until my Day of Flight came.

"Of course I couldn't take it & didn't want to. While there was a slight 'pull' in my heart urging me to the western woods & possible punishment/banishment, I resisted easily enough & continued to stay where I was.

"Over the course of several weeks ... things happened ... & didn't happen. First, my halo came off. Day by day, I felt its' hold lessen until ... one day ... I was able to pry it off. I wasn't going to wait for it to fall off. I wanted it off quick as possible. It hangs on a nail in the attic at home. I go look at it ... sometimes.

...

"My raven black wings withered & eventually dropped. Somehow my body remembered how wonderful it was to lay flat on my back in bed, nothing between me & matress.

"As for what didn't happen, well ... I felt no compulsion to hide myself away from people. None of the Washis' speechless minions came to take me away, or any of the Community Watch to arrest me. When I stepped outside the farming district, no one pursued from the temple.

"When I one day chanced to meet the Washi after my leaving the district, the sky didn't fall in on me. We just looked at one another. He only shook his head & moved on ... I was free ... FREE!"

The bakers' face became animated under his telling. Hikari, fascinated, leaned forward listening intently.

"I was able to secure employment here. The then owner knew me from before when I delivered grain & took me on. It was here I further established myself in the world of men. Here I learned my new trade & for the first time earned a real living, a real wage. I tell you Hikari, there's nothing like earning & having real money in your pocket. Nothing like that notebook scrip the old man uses to keep you under his thumb, but actual money!

"My purse became my symbol in dealing with others on a one to one, value for value basis. You might have heard the saying that 'A man is as good as his money'? It's not the money itself but in how one gets it. If one gets it rightly, on the square ... without swindle or

shortchanging, then his money is good as he is good.

"I know this is new & alien to you but hear me out. You've been quite a while in Guri but only under the sway of the Renmei. But even within the confines of the wall, there's a whole new world waiting for you.

"I certainly didn't spend my money like a fool. I was used to doing without & still bought used out of force of habit. I lived simply as possible, scrimped & saved, building my earnings, I eventually took out a loan at the bank, buying this business when the owner retired. In a few short years I was able to pay off the loan & expand.

"During that time, Klara & I met, got married & raised a family . . ."

Hikari cast a questioning look Klaras' way.

"He slowly told me over the course of our courtship about himself. At first I thought it wild fantasy but kept it to myself. It wasn't just the sincerity in the way he told it but the very detailed explanations about the haibane I eventually came to believe . . .

"On our wedding night," the older woman blushed, "when I saw the scars on his back . . . from where his wings had been . . .

"A bad haibane, but a good man . . ."

Hikari knew the couple to be close over the time she worked for them. Now she knew it to be more so than originally thought.

"You mentioned . . . new world?"

"Yes . . . As a Haibane & later in my apprenticeship here, I studied all I could, not only of Haibane lore & law but also that of Guri itself. In them I found nothing that said I HAD to accept a solitary life away from all if I didn't take my Day of Flight.

"My theory is that anyone going into exile does so out of a profound feeling of guilt. A guilt so heavy they can't find it in themselves to counter or resist. A guilt I can only at times feel oh so . . . slightly. I know there was something in my past before Guri but for the life of me I can't figure. Knowing no specifics, I've bothered less & less over the years."

The young Haibane girls' eyes widened. She had known only respect & reverence for the ways of her kind. Here, before her . . . talking with her . . . was some kind of unrepentant . . . "fallen angel".

"Over the course of time I made acquaintance of three other people of interest. One is a member of the town council, another an officer in the Community Watch. They were both intrigued & did studies of their own. Their findings pretty much corroborated mine: Like anyone else, I'm free & clear to go about my life here providing no actual statute laws are broken.

"You mentioned three . . ."

"Yes . . . the third one was himself a Haibane."

There was no getting over it for Hikari. Much of what she "knew" was being either added to or rewritten on the spot.

"An older gentleman. Regular customer here. I won't mention his name but you know him on sight. He too chose not to leave. Unlike me, he was not sin bound or so he says. His own investigations pretty much confirm what I already believe.

"My guess is there may be others here ... not many ... but here. It could be a sizeable portion of the population have haibane ancestry they know nothing of ...

"Who knows what else the Washi ... & this ... Renmei ... may be keeping from everyone-"

"Ben!"

The baker glanced at his wife & back to Hikari, noting the bewildered expression on her face. "Oh yes ... new world ... "

"The only new world I can ever know is over the wall ... the-"

"So far as you know hon."

"But-"

"But there's one waiting for you right here."

"You mentioned that before," the young Haibane stated. "All I can see in being here is-"

"Waiting for your Day of Flight? Sorting out whatever's inside," he held his hand to his chest, "keeping YOU here?"

"Y ... Yes ..."

"I said the time was urgent after mentioning the possibility of your leaving-"

"But how can you know my time is near!? ... Even I-"

"We've BOTH seen it before ... in others. How quiet, distant ... introspective ... they get when that feeling of completeness & fulfilment comes upon them ... keeping to themselves. That distant look they have ... to that place in the woods."

"We've seen that in you dear."

Hikari turned her now panicked glance at Klara.

"For the past couple days we've noticed how quiet & even more thoughtfull you've been ... That look of contentment ..."

"But I've had no thought of leaving ... no ... " Any thoughts of contentment were also far from her in this agitated state.

"A Haibane has no thought of leaving until hours, even minutes before the urge comes. In the times we've seen it in others, it came suddenly. Before we knew it that beam of light ascended to the

heavens from the ruins in the woods & we were missing someone we knew ... Someone we cared about."

A dark thought Hikari harbored from the beginning of this conversation came to the fore. She turned back to Ben.

"What do you gain from telling me this? What is it you hope to get out of all this.?"

"Ah! You do know my mind."

"More than minutes ago! I thought you kind ... good ... helpful. You two ..." She looked at Klara then back to her employer, "... were almost like ... parents(?) ... you ..."

"I will admit ... there are selfish motives here. Yes, I do hope to gain from this. However, I never try to get something for nothing ... something without an even exchange. One for one as I've said before."

"And that would be?"

The baker smiled inwardly. He knew the girl had a bit of sand under that sweet exterior & it heartened as well as amused. He knew he made the right choice in her.

"Before you came through that door 3 1/2 years ago, I swore to have as little to do with the Washi & the Charcoal Feathers Federation as was possible. Preferably NONE. It goes without saying I wouldn't have taken it out on you young folks. After all, you're just pawns in that game ...

"I couldn't believe it when you came through the door looking for work that day. I thought it a colossal joke of sorts. Was the Washi trying to pull something? It even crossed my mind to hire you for the sole purpose of rubbing the old mans' nose in it. 'Look o' great Communicator! One of yours is working for ME now ... HA!"

Ben continued before Hikari could indignantly interject.

"Whatever it was ... your smile ... that pleasant personality ... Maybe it's the way you light up the place when you're here ..."

"What we do know love," Klara exclaimed. "Is we had to keep you on."

"There is also the fact ... your enthusiasm ... you're ... you're a damn ... darn ... good, hard worker Hikari! I'd hate to lose you."

The young haibane noted the bakers' now flustered state. He wasn't one to stammer. There had to be more to it than ...

"It can't be just that! You can always get someone else. Another baker. Another one to work for you. Even if I was going to ... uh ... leave ... if ... I ... Why should I give up a chance at something as wonderful as ... just so you-"

"Yes ... yes ... there's more ... there's ..."

"What!?" For several minutes Hikari had been leaning forward, hands on desk. She felt Klara's left hand holding her right.

"When you first started here, both Klara & I decided to actually pay you a living wage.

"We considered your being paid in the washis' notebook scrip to be outrageous ... Nothing more than a way to keep you under his control. We couldn't let you have it for the time being of course, so we waited."

"Waited until now to bribe me from what may be the greatest ..."

The baker held up his hand. Hikari could see He was reaching a limit.

"There's 3 1/2 years of wages, including raises & bonuses when business was more than good. The money's in an account at the bank under a different name. All that needs be done is for Klara or I to sign off on it. If you decide to stay in Guri you won't be without resources. You'll have a definite leg-up."

Hikaris' exasperation had built up. She couldn't possibly see how money could ever compensate for a missed chance at transcendence. An offer in the face of that was beyond ridiculous. It was ... blasphemous ... it was ...

She abruptly stood up, drawing in her breath to voice her indignation when Klara cut her short.

"Think of it dear ... as a dowry of sorts."

The young womans' gasp more than audible. Wind taken from her sails before even moving.

"D ... dow-ry?" She slumped back down in her chair, at a total loss for words.

"Klara & I feel there is no one better for a daughter in law than you. You've worked alongside our sons all this time & know them more than well. Of course Vitorio is already married & Susuke's too young. However both Jotaro & Gian-Carlo have expressed much more than a passing interest to us. They know of my past & thus your situation. They've both sworn to hold off until my say so. They bide their time."

Klara smiled. "Gian-Carlo is intrigued with the idea of a ... 'faerie wife'."

The blush on Hikaris' face was more than evident.

"Of course if you stay, you're under no obligation to marry anyone. The money in the account is yours, free & clear. You've more than earned it."

The young haibane alternately shifted her gaze from Ben to Klara several times. A lot had been put upon her in the last few minutes. A few short moments before, life had been simple with no complication.

"Hikari ... hon ... You have a choice. A real one to make. One we hope you make before the Washi hands you that little box ...

"You can take your day of flight ... go over the wall ... to whatever afterlife the Washi may have only vaguely hinted at. Who knows? Maybe it is that something glorious most of us thought it might be.

"Or ... you can stay with us. Here you have resources, position & a more than even chance of a real, definite future with the possibility of marriage & children. Something you may not have had in your previous life & certainly not as a Haibane ... Something ..."

From across the desk, both of Klaras' hands clasped Hikaris' right.

"Dear ... Whatever you decide ... If ... if you do go over ... if you choose to leave & you are in that beyond ... remember us. Remember there are those of us here who ... not only care for you ... But deeply love you."

* * *

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